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THE BOYHOOD OF LINCOLN

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ELEANOR ATKINSON



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THE BOYHOOD  
OF LINCOLN

## NOTE

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*Nolan Creek, in which little Abraham was nearly drowned*



# THE BOYHOOD OF LINCOLN

BY

ELEANOR ATKINSON

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“**W**ANT to know what kind o’ boy Abe Lincoln was? Well, I reckon old Dennis Hanks is the only one livin’ that knowed him that arly. Knowed him the day he was born, an’ lived with him most o’ the time till he was twenty-one an’ left home fur good. ‘Abe,’ sez I, many a time, ‘if you die fust folks’ll have to come to me to find out what kind o’ boy you was.’ We used to laugh over that, fur it looked like he’d live longer’n me. I was ten years older’n Abe, an’ he was as strong as a hoss. ‘Well, Denny,’ he’d say, ‘I don’t want you to die fust, fur folks’d jist nigh about pester me to death to l’arn what kind o’ boy you was.’ He-he-he! Abe’d had his

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joke if he'd died the next minute." The old man chuckled to himself and lapsed into a doze by the fire.

It was in January, 1889, that the writer spent a long, leisurely afternoon with Lincoln's cousin and playmate in his home in Charleston, Illinois. He was ninety years old at that time, and died three or four years later. He was living with his daughter, Mrs. Dowling, herself a great grandmother of sixty-nine, in a comfortable brick cottage, built, as she said, nearly a half century before, probably the first brick house in the town. The furniture was so old-fashioned that Tom Lincoln may well have made some of it.

In a pleasant, low-ceiled sitting-room, with a bright rag-carpet and a coal fire, Dennis Hanks sat, tilted back in a splint-bottomed chair, asleep, in the light of the pale winter sunshine that streamed



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through a western window. A withered figure of an ancient man he was, in loose black clothes, his slippered feet resting on a rung of the chair, his gnarled, bloodless hands clasped on the top of a thorn stick that was polished by long use. A soft, black felt hat covered his head, a thin fringe of silvery white hair falling from under the brim to his coat collar. His face was clean-shaven, and his skin was of that peculiar, rosy transparency seen only in first and second childhood. Asleep, the old man's face was as unreflective as an infant's, but in animation it showed a curious resemblance to Lincoln's, although cast in a smaller, weaker mold—the high cheek-bones, broad forehead, wide mouth and strong jaw, and the deep-set eyes that sparkled with droll memories, or were dimmed by tragic ones.

He awoke suddenly and blinked his

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eyes, one of which was blind, at his visitor, with the sleepy amazement of a baby, and her presence had to be explained to him again. In his speech he had many words characteristic of the South, grafted on the Western stock, although he had left Kentucky at the age of eighteen.

“Tom Linkhorn—hey? Yes, that’s the way we punounced it, back thar in Kaintucky, an’ until Abe l’arned us better. But I reckon I was too old a dog to l’arn new tricks, an’ I furgit sometimes. Well, Tom an’ Nancy Hanks Lincoln lived on a farm in Hardin County about two miles from us, when Abe was born. I ricollect Tom comin’ over to our house, one cold mornin’ in Feb’uary an’ sayin’ kind o’ slow an’ sheepish: ‘Nancy’s got a boy baby.’

“Mother got flustered an’ hurried up her work to go over to look after the little feller, but I didn’t have nothin’ to wait

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fur, so I jist tuk an' run the hull two miles to see my new cousin. Nancy was layin' thar in a pole bed lookin' purty happy. Tom'd built up a good fire and throwed a b'ar skin over the kivers to keep 'em warm, an' set little two-year-old Sairy on the bed, to keep 'er off the dirt floor. Yes, thar was only a dirt floor in the cabin. Sairy always was a say-nothin' little gal with eyes like an owl's, an' she set thar an' stared at the new baby, an' pinte 'er finger at him.

"You bet I was tickled to death. Babies wasn't as plenty as blackberries in the woods o' Kaintucky. Mother come over an' washed him an' put a yaller flannen petticoat an' a linsey shirt on him, an' cooked some dried berries with wild honey fur Nancy, an' slicked things up an' went home. An' that's all the nuss'n either of 'em got. Lordy! women nowadays don't

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know what their grandmothers went through an' lived—some of 'em. A good many of 'em died arly. Abe's said many a time that Nancy'd lived to be old if she'd had any kind o' keer, an' I reckon she must 'a' ben strong to 'a' stood what she did.

“ ‘What you goin’ to name him, Nancy?’ I asked her.

“ ‘Abraham,’ she says, ‘after his gran’-father that come out to Kaintucky with Dan’l Boone. He was mighty smart an’ wasn’t afeered o’ nothin’, an’ that’s what a man has to be out here to make anything out o’ hisself.’

“ I rolled up in a b’ar skin an’ slep’ by the fire-place that night, so I could see the little feller when he cried, and Tom had to git up an’ ’tend to him. Nancy let me hold him purty soon. Folks are always askin’ me if Abe was a good-lookin’

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baby. Well, now, he looked jist like any other baby, at fust; like red cherry-pulp squeezed dry, in wrinkles. An' he didn't improve none as he growed older. Abe never was much fur looks. I ricollect how Tom joked about Abe's long legs when he was toddlin' round the cabin. He growed out o' his clothes faster'n Nancy could make 'em.

“But he was mighty good comp'ny, solemn as a papoose, but interested in everything. An' he always did have fits o' cuttin' up. I've seen him when he was a little feller, settin' on a stool, starin' at a visitor. All of a sudden he'd bust out laughin' fit to kill. If he told us what he was laughin' at, half the time we couldn't see no joke.

“Looks didn't count them days, no-how. It was stren'th an' work an' dare-devil. A lazy man or a coward was jist

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pizen, an' a spindlin' feller had to stay in the settlemint. The clearin's hadn't no use fur him. Tom was strong, an' he wasn't lazy nor afeerd o' nothin', but he was kind o' shif'less—couldn't git nothin' ahead, an' didn't keer putickalar. Lots o' them kind o' fellers in arly days, druther hunt an' fish, an' I reckon they had their use. They killed off the varmints an' made it safe fur other fellers to go into the woods with an ax.

“When Nancy married Tom he was workin' in a carpenter shop in Liztown. —Elizabethtown?—Well, I reckon. We was purty keerless about names them days. It wasn't Tom's fault he couldn't make a livin' by his trade. Thar was sca'cely any money in that kentry. Every man had to do his own tinkerin', an' keep everlastin'ly at work to git enough to eat. So Tom tuk up some land. It was mighty

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ornery land, but it was the best Tom could git, when he hadn't much to trade fur it.

“Pore? We was all pore, them days, but the Lincolns was porer than anybody. Choppin' trees, an' grubbin' roots, an' splittin' rails, an' huntin' an' trappin' didn't leave Tom no time to put a puncheon floor in his cabin. It was all he could do to git his fambly enough to eat and to kiver 'em. Nancy was turrible ashamed o' the way they lived, but she knowed Tom was doin' his best, an' she wasn't the pesterin' kind nohow. She was purty as a pitcher an' smart as you'd find 'em anywhar. She could read an' write. The Hankses was some smarter'n the Lincolns. Tom thought a heap o' Nancy, an' was as good to her as he knowed how. He didn't drink, or swear, or play cyards, or fight; an' them was drinkin', cussin', quarrelsome days. Tom was popylar, an'

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he could lick a bully if he had to. He jist couldn't git ahead, somehow.

“ It didn't seem no time till Abe was runnin' 'round in buckskin moccasins an' breeches, a tow-linen shirt an' coonskin cap. Yes, that's the way we all dressed them days. We couldn't keep sheep fur the wolves, an' pore folks didn't have sca'cely any flax except what they could git tradin' skins. We wasn't much better off'n Injuns, except 't we tuk an intrust in religion and polytics. We et game an' fish, an' wild berries an' lye hominy, an' kep' a cow. Sometimes we had corn enough to pay fur grindin' meal an' sometimes we didn't, or thar wasn't no mill nigh enough. When it got so we could keep chickens, an' have salt pork an' corn dodgers, an' gyardin sass an' molasses, an' have jeans pants an' cowhide boots to wear, we felt as if we was gittin'



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along in the world. But that was some years later.

“Abe never give Nancy no trouble after he could walk except to keep him in clothes. Most o’ the time we went b’ar-foot. Ever wear a wet buckskin glove? Them moccasins wasn’t no putection ag’inst the wet. Birch bark, with hickory bark soles, stropped on over yarn socks, beat buckskin all holler, fur snow. Me ’n’ Abe got purty handy contrivin’ things thataway. An’ Abe was right out in the woods, about as soon’s he was weaned, fishin’ in the crick, settin’ traps fur rabbits an’ muskrats, goin’ on coon-hunts with Tom an’ me an’ the dogs; follerin’ up bees to find bee-trees, an’ drappin’ corn fur his pappy. Mighty interestin’ life fur a boy, but thar was a good many chances he wouldn’t live to grow up.

“Tom got holt o’ a better farm after

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awhile, but he couldn't git a clear title to it, so when Abe was eight years old, an' I was eighteen, we all lit out fur Indiany. Kaintucky was gittin' stuck up, with some folks rich enough to own niggers, so it didn't seem no place fur pore folks anymore. My folks was dead, an' I went with some relations—the Sparrows. Yes; same Sparrows 'at raised Nancy. Nancy emptied the shucks out o' the tow-linen ticks, an' I piled everything they had wuth takin' on the backs o' two pack hosses. Tom could make new pole beds an' puncheon tables an' stools, easier'n he could carry 'em. Abe toted a gun, an' kep' it so dry on the raft, crossin' the Ohio, that he shot a turkey hen with it the fust day we got to Indiany. He couldn't stop talkin' about it till Tom hollered to him to quit.

“Tom brung his tools, an' four hun-

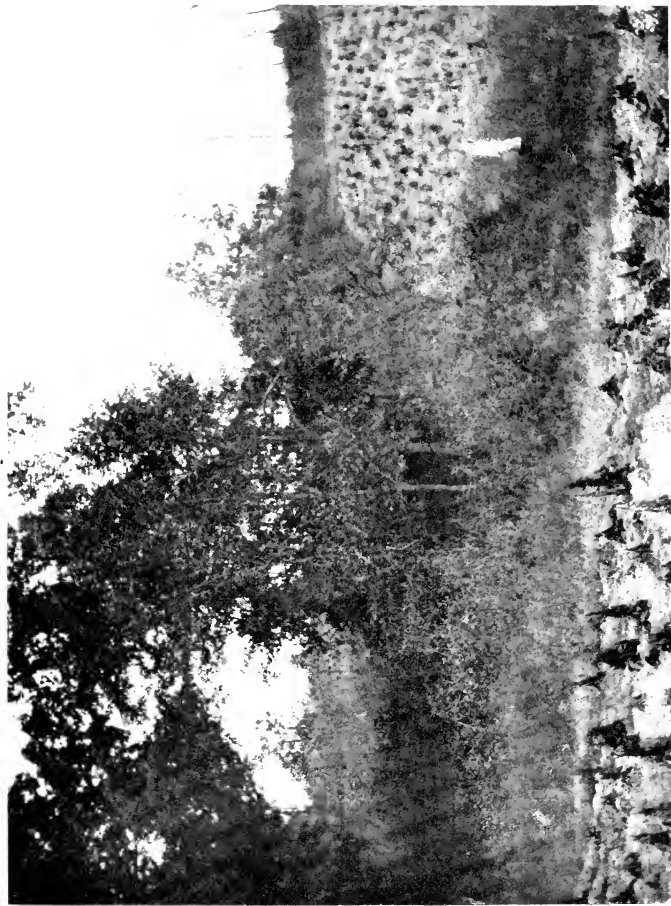
derd gallons o' whisky to trade fur land with Mr. Gentry. It was in Spencer County, back a piece from the Ohio river. We had to chop down trees to make a road to the place, but it was good land, in the timber whar the women could pick up their firewood, an' on a crick with a deer-lick handy, an' a spring o' good water. We all lived in pole-sheds fur a year.—Don't know what pole-sheds is?—Well, they're jist shacks o' poles, roofed over, but left open on one side; no floor, no fireplace, not much better'n a tree. I've seen Injun lodges that'd beat pole-sheds all holler fur keepin' out the weather. I don't see how the women folks lived through it. Boys are half wild anyhow, an' me 'n' Abe had a bully good time. Thar was lots o' game an' fish, an' plenty o' work.

“ 'Bout the time we got our cabins up

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the Sparrows both died o' milk-sickness an' I went to Tom's to live. Then Nancy died o' the same disease. The cow et pizen weeds, I reckon. O Lord, O Lord, I'll never furgit the mizry in that little green-log cabin in the woods when Nancy died!

“Me 'n' Abe helped Tom make the coffin. He tuk a log left over from buildin' the cabin, an' I helped him whipsaw it into planks an' plane 'em. Me 'n' Abe held the planks while Tom bored holes an' put 'em together, with pegs Abe'd whittled. Thar wasn't sca'cely any nails in the kentry an' little iron, except in knives and guns an' cookin' pots. Tom's tools was a wonder to the hull deestric. 'Pears to me like Tom was always makin' a coffin fur some one. We laid Nancy close to the deer-run in the woods. Deer was the only wild critters the women wasn't afeerd



*The scene of Lincoln's birth. The pole on the knoll at the right marks the spot where the birthplace cabin originally stood*

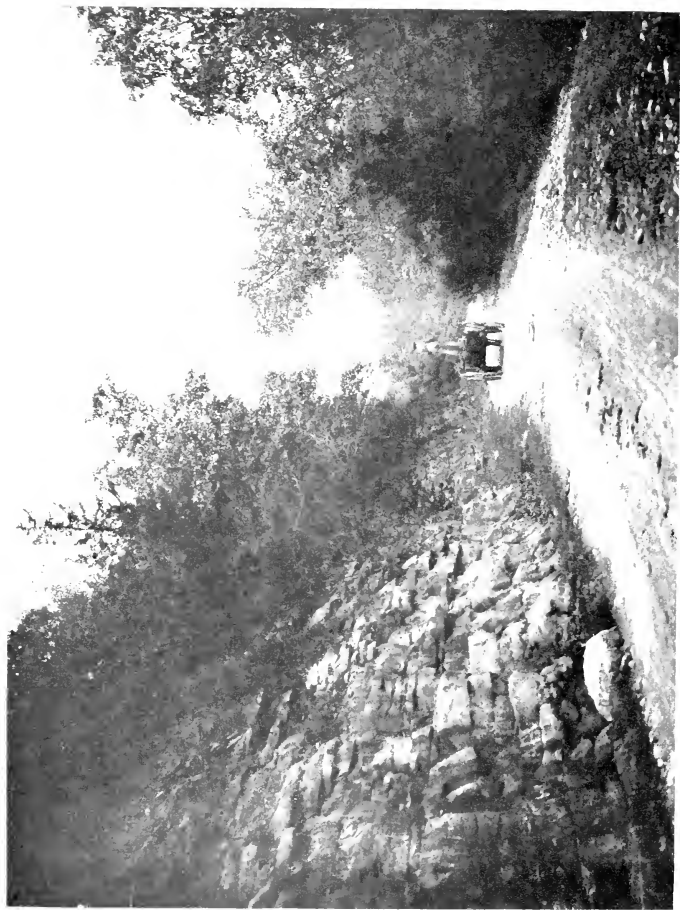


*A bit of the farm on which Abraham Lincoln was born*



*The Lincoln farm spring is famous throughout Kentucky for the purity of its water.*

*It was this spring that invited Tom Lincoln to locate by it, and it was the waters of this spring that christened the battleship "Kentucky."*



*The old Louisville and Nashville pike, which runs through the Lincoln farm*



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of. Abe was some'er's 'round nine years old, but he never got over the mizable way his mother died. I reckon she didn't have no sort o' keer—pore Nancy!”

The old man fell asleep again, exhausted by his own emotions. An ancient clock with a quaint face, ticked loud on an old-fashioned dresser, while Dennis slept, a long half-hour.

“Nancy,” was murmured, to start him off again, when he woke up.

“I reckon it was thinkin' o' Nancy an' things she'd done said to him that started Abe to studyin' that next winter. He could read an' write. Me'n' Nancy'd l'arnt him that much, an' he'd gone to school a spell; but it was nine miles thar an' back, an' a pore make-out fur a school, anyhow. Tom said it was a waste o' time, an' I reckon he was right. But Nancy kep' urg-in' Abe to study. ‘Abe,’ she'd say, ‘you

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I'arn all you kin, an' be some account,' an' she'd tell him stories about George Washington, an' say that Abe had jist as good Virginny blood in him as Washington. Mebbe she stretched things some, but it done Abe good.

“Well, me 'n' Abe spelled through Webster's spellin' book twict before he got tired. Then he tuk to writin' on the puncheon floor, the fence rails and the wooden fire-shovel, with a bit o' charcoal. We got some wrappin' paper over to Gentryville, an' I made ink out o' blackberry brier-root an' copperas. Kind o' ornery ink that was. It et the paper into holes. Got so I could cut good pens out o' turkey-buzzard quills. It pestered Tom a heap to have Abe writin' all over everything thataway, but Abe was jist wropped up in it.

“‘Denny,’ he sez to me many a time,

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'look at that, will you? *Abraham Lincoln!* That stands fur me. Don't look a blamed bit like me!' An' he'd stand an' study it a spell. 'Peared to mean a heap to Abe. When Tom got mad at his markin' the house up, Abe tuk to markin' trees 'at Tom wanted to cut down, with his name, an' writin' it in the sand at the deer-lick. He tried to interest little Sairy in l'arnin' to read, but she never tuk to it. She was the only woman in the cabin that year, an' no neighbors fur miles. Sairy was a little gal, only 'leven, an' she'd git so lonesome, missin' her mother, she'd set by the fire an' cry. Me 'n' Abe got 'er a baby coon an' a turtle, and tried to git a fawn but we couldn't ketch any. Tom, he moped 'round. Wasn't wuth shucks that winter. He put the corn in in the spring an' left us to 'tend to it, an' lit out fur Kaintucky. Yes, we knowed

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what he went fur, but we didn't think he'd have any luck, bein' as pore as he was, and with two childern to raise.

"I reckon Abe'd a got discouraged about l'arnin' after awhile if it hadn't ben fur his stepmother. We was all nigh about tickled to death when Tom brung a new wife home. She'd ben Sairy Bush, an' Tom'd ben in love with 'er before he met up with Nancy, but her folks wouldn't let Tom have 'er, because he was shif'less. So she married a man named Johnston an' he died. Then her 'n' Tom got married. She had three childern of 'er own, an' a four-hoss wagon-load o' goods—feather pillers an' homespun blankets, an' patchwork quilts an' chists o' drawers, an' a flax-wheel an' a soap kittle, an' cookin' pots an' pewter dishes—lot o' truck like that 'at made a heap o' diffrence in a backwoods cabin.

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“ Yes, Aunt Sairy was a woman o’ propputy, an’ could ’a’ done better, I reckon, but Tom had a kind o’ way with the women, an’ maybe it was somethin’ she tuk comfort in to have a man that didn’t drink an’ cuss none. She made a heap more o’ Tom, too, than pore Nancy did. Before winter he’d put in a new floor, he’d whipsawed an’ planed off so she could scour it; made some good beds an’ cheers, an’ tinkered at the roof so it couldn’t snow in on us boys ’at slep’ in the loft. Purty soon we had the best house in the kentry. Thar was eight of us then to do fur, but Aunt Sairy had faculty an’ didn’t ’pear to be hurried or worried none. Little Sairy jist chirked right up with a mother an’ two sisters fur comp’ny. Abe used to say he was glad Sairy had some good times. She married purty young an’ died with her fust baby. I reckon it was like

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Nancy, she didn't have no sort o' keer."

After a moment of reverie, old Dennis began to chuckle to himself. Tragedy and comedy intermingled in his memory as only Shakespeare and real life can bring them together, without incongruity or without losing a laugh or a tear.

"Aunt Sairy sartinly did have faculty. I reckon we was all purty ragged and dirty when she got thar. The fust thing she did was to tell me to tote one o' Tom's cyarpenter benches to a place outside the door, near the hoss-trough. Then she had me 'n' Abe 'n' John Johnston, her boy, fill the trough with spring water. She put out a big gourd full o' soft soap, an' another one to dip water with, an' told us boys to wash up fur dinner. You jist naturally had to be somebody when Aunt Sairy was around. She had Tom build 'er

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a loom, an' when she heerd o' some lime burners bein' 'round Gentryville, Tom had to mosey over an' git some lime, an' white-wash the cabin. An' he made 'er an ash-hopper fur lye, an' a chicken-house nothin' could git into. Then—te-he-he-he! she set some kind of a dead-fall trap fur him an' got him to jine the Baptist Church! Cracky, but Aunt Sairy was some pun-kins!

“An' it wasn't only in things to make us comf'able an' well thought of. She didn't have no eddication herself, but she knowed what l'arnin' could do fur folks. She wasn't thar very long before she found out how Abe hankered after books. She heerd him talkin' to me, I reckon. ‘Denny,’ he'd say, ‘the things I want to know is in books. My best friend's the man who'll git me one.’ Well, books wasn't as plenty as wild-cats, but I got him

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one by cuttin' a few cords o' wood. It had a lot o' yarns in it. One I ricollect was about a feller that got near some darned fool rocks 'at drawed all the nails out o' his boat an' he got a duck-in'. Wasn't a blamed bit o' sense in that yarn."

"Sindbad The Sailor, in The Arabian Nights?"

"Hey? Well, I reckon. I ain't no scholar. Abe'd lay on his stummick by the fire, an' read out loud to me 'n' Aunt Sairy, an' we'd laugh when he did, though I reckon it went in at one ear an' out at the other with her, as it did with me. Tom'd come in an' say: 'See here, Abe, your mammy kain't work with you a botherin' her like that;' but Aunt Sairy always said it didn't bother her none, an' she'd tell Abe to go on. I reckon that encouraged Abe a heap.



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“ ‘Abe,’ sez I, many a time, ‘them yarns is all lies.’

“ ‘Mighty darned good lies,’ he’d say, an’ go on readin’ an’ chucklin’ to hisself, till Tom’d kiver up the fire fur the night an’ shoo him off to bed.

“ I reckon Abe read that book a dozen times, an’ knowed them yarns by heart. He didn’t have nothin’ much else to read except Aunt Sairy’s Bible. He cut four cords o’ wood onct, to git one stingy little slice of a book. It was a life of Washington; an’ he’d lay over the Statoots o’ Indian half the night. I couldn’t make head nor tail o’ that punk. We’d git holt of a newspaper onct in a while, an’ Abe’d l’arn Henry Clay’s speeches by heart. He liked the stories in the Bible, too, an’ he got a little book o’ fables some’ers. I reckon it was them stories he read that give him so many yarns to tell. I asked him

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onct after he'd gone to laavin' and could make a jury laugh or cry by firin' a yarn at 'em:

“ ‘Abe,’ sez I, ‘whar did you git so blamed many lies?’ An’ he’d always say, ‘Denny, when a story l’arns you a good lesson, it ain’t no lie. God tells truths in parables. They’re easier fur common folks to understand an’ ricollect.’ His stories was like that. If a man’d ben doin’ any-thing low-down, Abe’d make him feel meaner’n a suck-egg dog about it.

“ Seems to me now I never seen Abe after he was twelve ’at he didn’t have a book some’ers ’round. He’d put a book inside his shirt an’ fill his pants pockets with corn dodgers, an’ go off to plow or hoe. When noon come he’d set down under a tree, an’ read an’ eat. An’ when he come to the house at night, he’d tilt a cheer back by the chimbly, put his feet on the

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rung, an' set on his backbone and read. Aunt Sairy always put a candle on the mantel-piece fur him, if she had one. An' as like as not Abe'd eat his supper thar, takin' anything she'd give him that he could gnaw at an' read at the same time. I've seen many a feller come in an' look at him, Abe not knowin' anybody was 'round, an' sneak out ag'in like a cat, an' say: 'Well, I'll be darned!' It didn't seem natural, nohow, to see a feller read like that. Aunt Sairy'd never let the children pester him. She always said Abe was goin' to be a great man some day. An' she wasn't goin' to have him hindered."

Another long, dozing nap intervened. The sun was declining in the west, and life's sands were running out for Dennis Hanks. He lived only in that faraway past with the hero of his youth, memory

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flaring up and dying away as the forces of life ebbed and flowed. Every time he slept he had to be reminded of the eager listener, and to have some spring touched to set his mind going again. Sometimes he would awaken only to sit and gaze absently out of the window, or to laugh to himself. If spoken to he would start and stare with his one dim eye a moment, before he could make the long leap to the present.

“Hey? Is that the only way Abe l’arnt things—out o’ books? You bet he was too smart to think everything was in books. Sometimes a preacher, ’r a circuit-ridin’ jedge ’r lyyer, ’r a stump-speakin’ politician, ’r a school teacher’d come along. When one o’ them rode up, Tom’d go out an’ say: ‘Light, stranger,’ like it was polite to do. Then Abe’d come lopin’ out on his long legs, throw one over the top rail

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and begin firin' questions. Tom'd tell him to quit, but it didn't do no good, so Tom'd have to bang him on the side o' his head with his hat. Abe'd go off a spell an' fire sticks at the snow-birds, an' whistle like he didn't keer. 'Pap thinks it ain't polite to ask folks so many questions,' he'd say. 'I reckon I wasn't born to be polite, Denny. Thar's so darned many things I want to know. An' how else am I goin' to git to know 'em?'

"When Abe was about seventeen, somethin' happened that druv him nigh crazy. Thar was a feller come over from England—Britisher, I reckon—an' spoke in Congress about a settlemint he was goin' to lay out on the Wabash, buyin' out some loony Dutch religious fellers that had mills an' schools thar. Now, mebbe you think 'at us folks livin' in the backwoods didn't know what was goin' on in

the world. Well, you'd be mighty mistaken about that. We kep' track o' Congress fur one thing. Thar wasn't much to talk about but polytics, an' we thrashed over everything in argymints at the cross-roads stores. The big-bugs down East wasn't runnin' everythin'. Polytics had sort o' follered us over the Gap trail an' roosted in the clearin's. Thar was Henry Clay in Kaintucky an' Old Hick'ry in Tennessee, at it tooth an' nail, an' we all tuk sides.

“So when this furrin feller spoke in Congress about that gyarden o' Eden he was goin' to fence in on the Wabash, we soon heerd about it. Boats brung news every week. An' one day arly in the winter, a big keel-boat come down from Pittsburg over the Ohio. They called it 'the boatload o' knowledge,' it had sich a passel o' books an' machines an' men o' l'arnin'

on it. Then little rowboats an' rafts crossed over from Kaintucky, an' ox teams an' pack-hosses went through Gentryville and struck across kentry to—to—plague on it! Abe'd tell you in a minute——”

“New Harmony, Robert Owen's colony?”

“That's it! Thar wasn't sca'cely anything else talked about fur a spell. I reckon some folks thought it was New Jerusalem, an' nobody'd have to work. Anyway, thar was a lot o' wuthless cusses lit out fur that settlemint. Abe'd a broke his back to go, an' it nigh about broke his heart when he couldn't.

“Denny, thar's a school an' thousands o' books thar, an' fellers that know everything in creation,' he'd say, his eyes as big 'n' hungry as a hoot-owl's. The schoolin' cost only about a hunderd dollars a year, an' he could 'a' worked out

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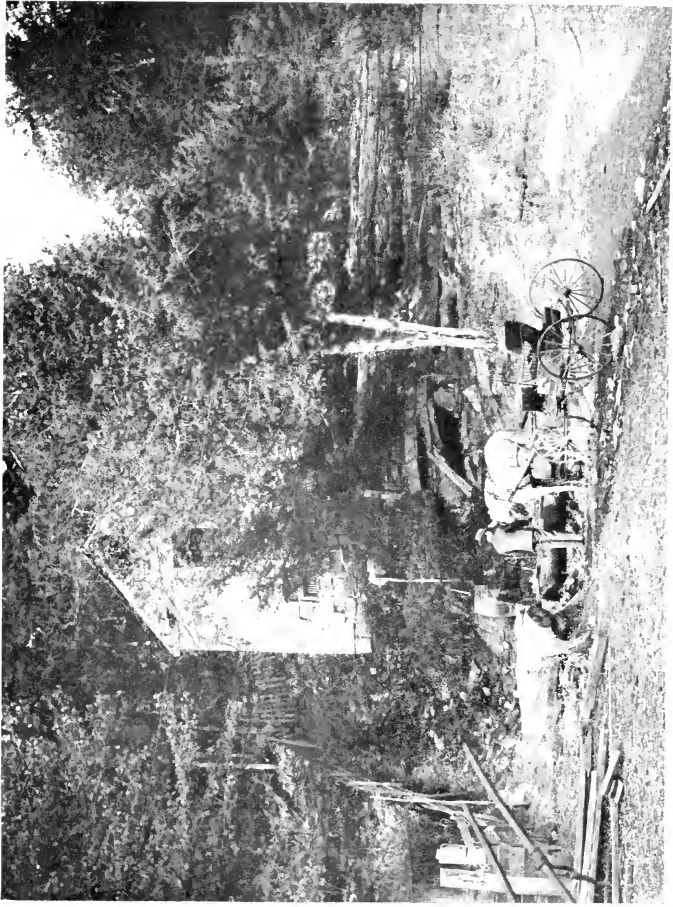
his board, but Abe might jist as well 'a' wished fur a hunderd moons to shine at night. I was married to one o' the Johnstone gals by then an' had hard grubbin' to keep my fambly, or I'd 'a' helped him. Tom didn't set no store by them things. An' thar it was, only about sixty miles west of us, an' Abe couldn't go! The place petered out after awhile, as it was sartin to do, with all them ornery fellers in it, livin' off the workers. But I reckon it lasted long enough fur Abe to 'a' l'arned what he wanted to know. Well, I reckon Abe put it out o' his mind, after awhile. If he couldn't git a thing he wanted he knowed how to do without it, an' mebbe he looked at it diffrunt afterwards. But things'd ben easier fur him if he could 'a' gone to that school."

The tragedy of it was too big to real-





*On the edge of the Lincoln birthplace farm*



*The old house on the road to the mill where little Abraham used to stop for "cookies"*



*The old Nolan Mill, around which little Abraham used to play*



*The Lincoln family mill stone which was used to grind the family meal has for many years been used as a door "stop" to the house that was built upon the farm after*

ize! Was fate never to tire of piling pangs on that great heart? Robert Owen, William McClure, Robert Dale Owen, Audubon for a time, and others as celebrated; pioneers of liberal thought; founders of the Indiana school system and township libraries; forerunners of modern education, social ideals and science; so near as to touch his experience, to excite his hopes, but just outside his opportunity; mocking at him with this sardonic turn of the wheel! The wilderness life suddenly took on new terrors; the youth who overcame such baffling, deadening mischances, loomed up to colossal proportions. The clock ticked on; clinkers dropped into the grate. A sleek house-cat came in on velvet paws and curled himself up on the braided hearth-rug, in such luxurious content as Lincoln never knew. Old Dennis awoke, with prodigious yawns,

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and took up the dropped stitch of his narrative.\*

“When Abe grew up he was a tur-

\*Robert Owen, the wealthy English philanthropist and reformer, arrived on the lower Wabash in January, 1826, with distinguished disciples, to begin his social and educational experiment at New Harmony. The most dramatic and unique episode of pioneer life in the Middle West, it permanently affected and gave direction to intellectual development, although the experiment itself did not long survive. Dennis Hanks's account of it is as remarkable for its shrewdness of analysis as for its accuracy. The earlier biographers entirely overlooked the incident as, in all probability, having deep and lasting influence on Lincoln's character and career. Not finding anything confirmatory of Dennis Hanks's statement, on this phase of Lincoln's youth, appeal was made to Miss Ida M. Tarbell, who recovered so many facts that illuminate his early life. She permits me to quote her here: “When I was writing my ‘Early Life of Lincoln’ I looked up this very point, feeling sure that he must have heard more or less of the colony and been interested in it, but if I found anything at all it was unimportant. It is not possible that he did not take an interest in it, for the people of Indiana were very much stirred up over Owen's teachings, and there was much discussion in the newspapers of that day, and later in the meeting of the Indiana state legislature.” We are indebted, therefore, to Dennis Hanks for this distinct contribution to Lincolniana. It is probable that, in middle life, when the earlier biographers talked with him, he had forgotten it. In his second childhood memory of his youthful days was fully recovered. And he died before Miss Tarbell began her exhaustive researches.

## THE BOYHOOD OF LINCOLN

rible cut-up an' joker. Aunt Sairy was a good Baptist an' Tom an' the Johnston childern had jined, so the Baptist preachers always stopped at the house. Onct Abe tried to git a preacher to 'count fur them miracles about Jonah an' the whale an' the others, an' got him so worked up that when Abe asked him who was the father of Zebedee's childern, blamed if he could tell.

"When Abe was nineteen he was as tall as he was ever goin' to be, I reckon. He was the ganglin'est, awkwardest feller that ever stepped over a ten-rail, snake-fence. He had to duck to git through a door' an' 'peared to be all j'int's. Tom used to say Abe looked as if he'd ben chopped out with an ax an' needed a jack-plane tuk to him. Aunt Sairy often told Abe 'at his feet bein' clean didn't matter so much, because she could scour the floor,

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but he'd better wash his head, or he'd be a rubbin' dirt off on her nice whitewashed rafters.

"That put an idy in his head, I reckon. Several of us older ones was married then, an' thar was always a passel o' youngsters 'round the place. One day Abe put 'em up to wadin' in the mud-puddle by the hoss-trough. Then he tuk 'em one by one, turned 'em upside down, an' walked 'em acrost the ceilin', them ascreamin' fit to kill.

"Aunt Sairy come in, an' it was so blamed funny she set down an' laughed, though she said Abe'd oughter to be spanked. I don't know how far he had to go fur more lime, but he whitewashed the ceilin' all over agin. Aunt Sairy's said many a time 'at Abe'd never made her a mite o' trouble, 'r spoke a cross word to 'er sence she come into the house. He was the best boy she ever seen.



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“ He always liked to take a bag o’ corn an’ ride off to a hoss-mill about eighteen mile away to git some meal ground. The mill was worked by a plug an’ sweep, pulled by a bag-o’-bones hoss. Abe used to say his hound could eat meal faster’n that mill could grind it an’ then go hungry fur supper. But it was a good place fur visitin’ an’ swappin’ yarns. Other men’d be comin’ in an’ have to wait all day, mebbe, an’ they’d set on a rail fence an’ listen to Abe crackin’ jokes or argyin’ polytics. Abe’d come home with enough news an’ yarns to last a week. I didn’t want no other comp’ny when Abe was thar.

“ Abe had a powerful good mem’ry. He’d go to church an’ come home an’ say over the sermon as good as the preacher. He’d often do it fur Aunt Sairy, when she couldn’t go, an’ she said it was jist

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as good as goin' herself. He'd say over everything from beloved brethern to Amen without crackin' a smile, pass a pewter plate fur a collection an' then we'd all jine him in singin' the Doxology. Aunt Sairy thought a heap o' Abe, an' he did o' her, an' I reckon they'd a done most anything fur one another.

"She seemed to know Abe had more pride'n the rest of us. He always had a extry pair o' butternut-dyed jeans pants, an' a white shirt. When he was only thirteen Aunt Sairy said to him: 'Abe, you git holt o' some muslin some'ers an' have some white shirts, so you kin go to folks' houses right.' So he cut nine cords o' wood an' got nine yards o' unbleached muslin, an' she bleached it an' shrunk it an' made him two shirts. He put one o' them on every Sunday. Mebbe Abe wouldn't 'a' ben the man he was if it

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hadn't ben fur his mother an' stepmother encouragin' him.

"It was fur to git money to buy books, that Abe tuk them v'yages on the flat-boats. He was all fur bein' a river man fur a while. Tom owned Abe's time till he was twenty-one an' didn't want him to go. He was too vallyble fur chores. When Abe was on the farm Tom had more time to hunt an' fish, an' he'd always ruther do that than grub roots 'r hoe corn. Yes, Tom was kind o' shif'less. Well, him an' Abe struck up some kind o' dicker, an' Abe went off down the river, fur fifty cents a day, an' a bonus. It was big wages, but he never went but twict.

"Abe didn't take to tradin' nohow. He was too honest to make a livin' at it, an' folks tuk advantage of him. He was popylar, an' when he clerked the store

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had plenty o' fellers comin' to it who liked to hear him talk, but most o' them thought he was plumb foolish when he got to tradin', so he quit that. Aunt Sairy always said he'd oughter go into polytics, because when he got to argyin' the other feller'd purty soon say he had enough. Abe was a leader, too. He could break up rowdy crowds by tellin' a story that'd make 'em ashamed or make 'em laugh. He wouldn't take no sass, neither. If a feller was spilin' fur a fight, an' nothin' else'd do him, Abe'd accomydate him all right. Ginerally Abe could lay him out so he wouldn't know nothin' about it fur a spell. In rasslin', an' runnin', an' hoss-back ridin', an' log-rollin', an' rail-splittin' he could beat everybody. You'd 'a' thought there was two men in the woods when he got inter it with an ax. When he was fifteen he could bring me down

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by throwin' his leg over my shoulder. I always was a little runt of a feller.

“ Well! Lemme see. Yes; I reckon it was John Hanks 'at got restless fust an' lit out fur Illinois, an' wrote fur us all to come, an' he'd git land fur us. Tom was always ready to move. He never had his land in Indiany all paid fur, nohow. So he sold off his corn an' hogs an' piled everything into ox-wagons an' we all went—Linkhorns an' Hankses an' Johnstons, all hangin' together. I reckon we was like one o' them tribes o' Israel that you kain't break up, nohow. An' Tom was always lookin' fur the land o' Canaan. Thar was five famblies of us, then, an' Abe. It tuk us two weeks to git thar, raftin' over the Wabash, cuttin' our way through the woods, fordin' rivers, pryin' wagons an' steers out o' sloughs with fence rails, an' makin' camp. Abe cracked a joke every

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time he cracked a whip, an' he found a way out o' every tight place while the rest of us was standin' 'round scratchin' our fool heads. I reckon Abe an' Aunt Sairy run that movin', an' good thing they did, or it'd 'a' ben run into a swamp an' sucked under.

“It was a purty kentry up on the Sangamon, an' we was all tuk up with the idy that they could run steamboats up to our cornfields an' load; but we had fever'n ager turrible, so, in a year or two, we moved back here to Coles County, an' we've ben here ever sence. Abe helped put up a cabin fur Tom on the Sangamon, clear fifteen acres fur corn, an' split walnut rails to fence it in. Abe was some'ers 'round twenty-one. I reckon it must 'a' ben them same rails 'at John Hanks tuk——”

A bewildered look came into the old

face that, an instant before, had been as full of his story as an eager child's. Here was a shut door that memory could not pass. But he tugged at the stubborn lock:

"I reckon it must 'a' ben them same rails 'at John Hanks——"

"Took into the Convention at Chicago?"

His dim eye stared into a blurred past, unseeing. Then he said, whimperingly, as if here was something to which he had never been reconciled:

"It must 'a' ben about that time 'at Abe left home fur good."

The curtain of night had dropped down before the sun, too. It was dark outside. Mrs. Dowling brought in an oil lamp and set it down exactly in the middle of a crocheted mat on a little table. She glanced at her father, sleeping placidly in his chair, and pulled down the shade

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to shut out the chill of the winter evening. Then she unburdened her mind.

“I don’t want you to go away thinking so bad of Grandfather Lincoln. That’s what us younger ones called Uncle Abe’s father; and we called him Uncle Abe, though he was only father’s second cousin. I reckon kinfolks counted for more in early days. I’m just tired of hearing Grandfather Lincoln abused. Everybody runs him down. Father never gave him credit for what he was. He made a good living, and I reckon he would have got something ahead if he hadn’t been so generous. He had the old Virginia notion of hospitality—liked to see people sit up to the table and eat hearty, and there were always plenty of his relations and grandmother’s willing to live on him. Uncle Abe got his honesty, and his clean notions of living and his kind heart from his



father. Maybe the Hanks family was smarter, but some of them couldn't hold a candle to Grandfather Lincoln, when it came to morals. I've heard Grandmother Lincoln say, many a time, that he was kind and loving, and kept his word, and always paid his way, and never turned a dog from his door. You couldn't say that of every man, not even to-day, when men are decenter than they used to be."

A shrill cry, like that from a frightened child awakened by a bad dream, came from the chair in the sheltered corner.

"Whar's my watch? Whar's my watch?" Old Dennis was searching his pockets frantically, and tottering to a fall. Mrs. Dowling rushed to him and set him upright.

"Here, father, here's your watch! Nobody's going to take it from you. Uncle

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Abe gave him that watch, and he gets to dreaming that some one is trying to rob him of it." She restored his cane and hat, and disappeared into the kitchen again.

"Come 'ere," he beckoned mysteriously. "If you won't tell nobody I'll show you somethin'." He pulled from a secret, inside pocket, a heavy, old-fashioned coin-silver watch, with a steel chain.

"Abe gimme that."

"When Abe left home?" hoping to start the stream of memory to flowing, without a break in its continuity. He looked puzzled. Memory had leaped a gap of thirty-five years, to the next dramatic event in that simple life.

"I went down to Washington to see Abe, an' thar he was with a big watch, an' a chain spread over his wescoat. I plagued him about bein' so fine, an' he sez: 'Den-

ny, I bet you'd carry a watch if you had one, you old coon.' He went out an' bought this fur me an' I've carried it ever sence. Ain't many folks ever gits to see it. Thar's a feller up in Chicago, that's plumb crazy over Abe, an' he offered me five hunderd dollars fur it." He stowed the precious relic away carefully.

"I went down to Washington to see Abe about a neighbor that'd got into trouble. It was durin' the war, an' thar was a lot o' soldiers around, stickin' their blamed guns in everybody's faces. I hunted 'round fur a back door to sneak in, but couldn't find none. A soldier asked me what I was doin' thar.

" 'I want to see Abe Lincoln,' I sez.

" 'You kain't see him now,' he sez like a smarty.

" 'You bet I kin. Old Dennis Hanks hain't come clean from Illinois to git his

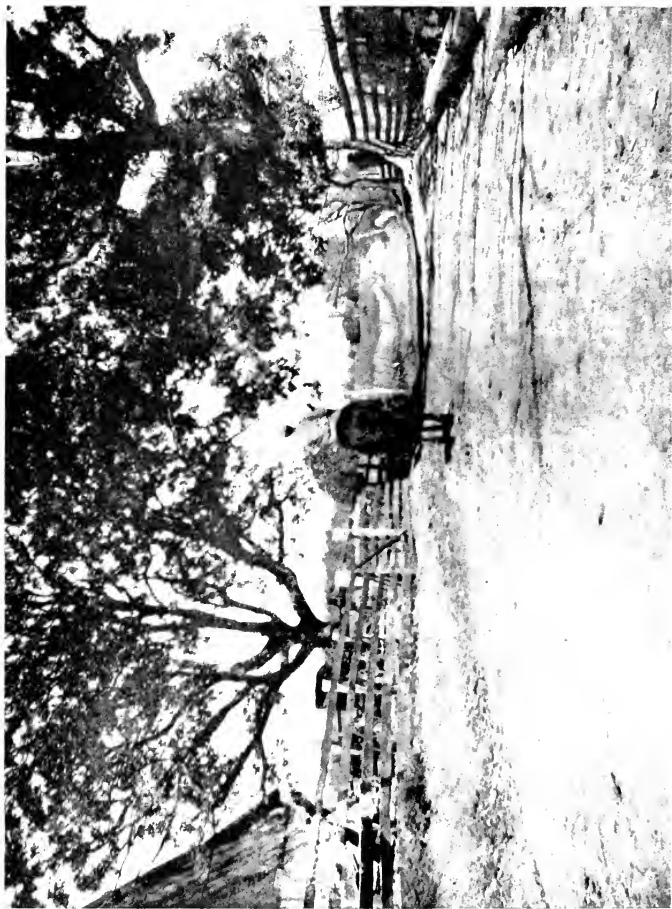
orders from a jay-bird like you!' Te-he-he-he! that feller got as red's an old turkey gobbler.

"Well, I waded right through a passel o' folks, an' opened a door they was all watchin', an' thar sot Abe as tall an' thin as his own shadder, at an ol' desk he'd tuk from his law office in Springfield.

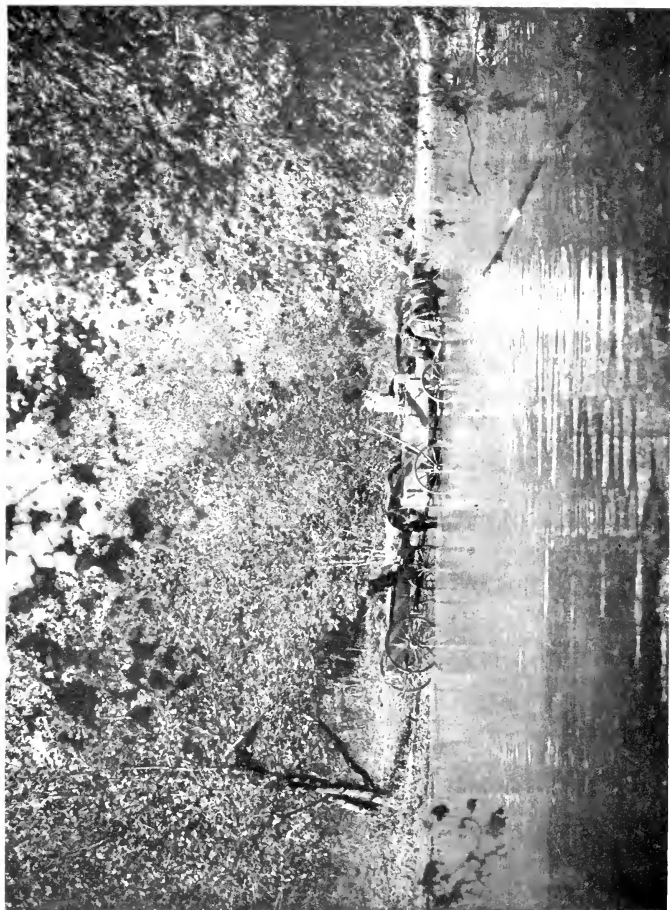
" 'Hey!' I hollered, 'git up thar an' shake! I ain't after no office, Abe.'

"He run an' gethered me in like they did in the Bible, so I had to take out my bandanner. Abe looked kind o' tired. I reckon they worked him purty hard down thar, but he laughed hearty.

" 'I'm glad you don't want no office, Denny; most of 'em do. You've got a heart as big as a steer, but you ain't got no head fur an office.' I up an' told him what I come fur. He sez: 'I'm too busy to-day, Denny, but Stanton'll fix that up



*On the Magnolia Road which runs from Hodgenville to the Lincoln birthplace farm*



*In the country about Lincoln's first home they ford most of the streams rather than build bridges*

fur you. You go over to the house an' Mary'll yive you somethin' to eat an' a shakedown.'

"But I put up to a tavern where I could feel more to home. Mary was a good woman, but she was too high-falutin fur me. Abe used to bring her over to the farm to visit Aunt Sairy, an' me 'n' him'd set an' talk about old times. That riled Mary considerable. She'd git on her high horse an' say: 'If Abe was low-down an' pore you needn't be throwin' it up to him,' but I reckon Abe didn't look at it thataway. Abe never noticed Mary's pesterin' no more'n an elephant would a skeeter. He'd jist git holt o' her hand, 'r pat her on the shoulder, an' she'd quiet down. You bet Mary was a good woman or Abe'd never 'a' loved her like he done. She didn't have nothin' ag'inst his kin-folks, pussonal, but I reckon she figgered

it out that we wouldn't help Abe's chances none. Mary thought the sun rose an' set in Abe. Thar's one thing Abe didn't miss, his women-folks stuck up fur him; Nancy an' Aunt Sairy an' Mary, an' I reckon that made up fur a good many other things. It must 'a' ben the way he treated 'em. Onct he said to me: 'Denny, men oughter be mighty good to women, fur nature give 'em the big end o' the log to lift, an' mighty little stren'th to do it with.'

"Mary was smart an' high-feelin' about Abe. When they was fust married she'd toss her head way up in the air like a blood-colt, an' tell us what a big man Abe was goin' to be. I enjyed laughin' over that, fur when a feller's as honest as Abe was, it ginerally stands in the way o' his gittin' on in the world. He purty nigh always got the wust of a trade. An'



then he didn't *look* great. He looked jist like the rest of us, only some humlier; kind o' common an' neighborly, not a bit stuck-up. You jist naturally liked to set an' visit with Abe.

"Well, as I was sayin', when I went down to Washington near the end o' the war, I knowed better'n to put Mary out when mebbe she'd be havin' fine comp'ny. Next mornin' Abe gimme the papers fur my case an' told me to take 'em over to Stanton.

" 'Abe,' sez I, 'blamed if I know whar the plageoned place is!' Abe laughed an' said somethin' about the mountain comin' to someun, talkin' in parables like old times, an' sent out a little feller 'at had on brass buttons enough to stock a store, an' purty soon Stanton come rampagin' in, snarlin' about them papers. But Abe made him sign 'em, an' he went out

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switchin' his spike-tail coat like a pesky crow. An' I said:

“ ‘ Abe, if I’s as big as you I’d take that little feller acrost my knees an’ spank him. He’s too sassy.’ Abe he laughed an’ said Stanton was a bigger feller’n him some ways, an’ I said he had a darned ugly way o’ showin’ it. But that was jist like Abe, never runnin’ anybody down, findin’ the good in ’em, an’ bearin’ with their little meannesses. Abe didn’t know how to be mean hisself. When God made Abe Lincoln He left the meanness out fur other folks to divide up among ’em. I reckon the rest of us got our sheer.”

Mrs. Dowling opened the door, giving a glimpse of a bright dining room and a board bountifully spread. Hospitality was one of the Hanks’ failings also.

“ Supper’s ready, father. You’ll have

supper with us, won't you?" to the stranger.

"Go 'way! Lemme 'lone!" cried old Dennis querulously, like a spoiled child interrupted in some absorbing play. His daughter made a comical face and shut the door hastily. Almost instantly he fell asleep. The cheerful sounds of the family at their evening meal penetrated to the silent room. Life goes on thus, flowing smoothly through long stretches of years; morning and evening, working, eating and sleeping; children playing in the sun and growing tall. A church bell called to the weekly prayer-meeting. How peaceful it was, how reassuring! Suddenly, as startling as a pistol shot in the silence, old Dennis cried out of his sleep:

"Dead! Honest Abe dead! My God, it ain't so!"

He was staring at the flickering shad-

ows of the firelight on the wall, in dazed horror, as at some fearful messenger. Then he aroused himself from the dream, shifted uneasily in his chair and sighed.

“ I’ve heerd that night an’ day fur nigh onto twenty-five years, an’ I kain’t believe it yit. I was settin’ in my shop peggin’ away at a shoe, when a man come runnin’ in from the street, lookin’ like a ghost, an’ said: ‘ Dennis, honest Abe’s dead; shot dead!’

“ It was in Aprile, an’ the sun was shinin’ an’ the grass turnin’ green, jist as if nothin’ had happened, an’ it seemed to me like the arth’d stopped. Thar wasn’t any tradin’ done sca’cely. Everything was kivered with black, an’ people standin’ round in the streets cryin’. I had to go out to the farm to tell Aunt Sairy. Tom’d ben dead a good while, an’ she was livin’ on thar, alone.

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“ ‘ Aunt Sairy,’ sez I, ‘ Abe’s dead.’

“ ‘ Yes, I know, Denny. I knowed they’d kill him. I ben awaitin’ fur it,’ an’ she never asked no questions. She was gittin’ purty old, an’ I reckon she thought she’d soon jine him. She never counted on seein’ him agin after he went down to Washington, nohow. He come out to the farm to see ’er, an’ when he kissed her good-by she reached her old hands up to his shoulders an’ looked at him as if he’s alayin’ in his coffin then, an’ sez to him: ‘ You’ll never come back, Abraham!’

“ ‘ Don’t you worry, Mammy,’ he sez. ‘ I’ll come back all right.’ But Mary sez Abe hisself thought he never would. He had them warnin’ dreams an’ second sight, an’ them ain’t healthy signs.

“ Well, I was gittin’ purty old myself. I was sixty-six, an’ nothin’ but a little dried-up nubbin of a shoemaker. I didn’t

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take no more intrust in things, an' folks thought I'd go next. But it's ben nigh onto twenty-five years, an' here I am livin' yit, an' not wuth shucks to nobody. 'Pears to me like thar ain't ben nothin' happened wuth talkin' about, an' nobody much wuth talkin' to sence Abe's gone.

"Some folks think you won't know anybody when you git to heaven, but I bet I'll know Abe Lincoln. He went straight thar, an' I ain't takin' no chances on it, but am livin' the best I know how, by church rules, so I kin go to heaven, too, an' meet up with Abe. Thar was a preacher feller come here onct, an' I was talkin' to him about thar not bein' any sense in Abe bein' shot thataway, an' him only fifty-six an' strong as a hoss. An' he said 'at he reckoned Abe'd done his work an' the Lord knowed best.

"'Done his work, hey?' I hollered.

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‘He hadn’t lived his life. I wouldn’t ’a’ give a darn if he’d never done another lick o’ work, if he’d jist come home an’ let me visit with him onct in awhile.

“Thar won’t be another man like Abe Lincoln this side o’ judgement day!”

THE END











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